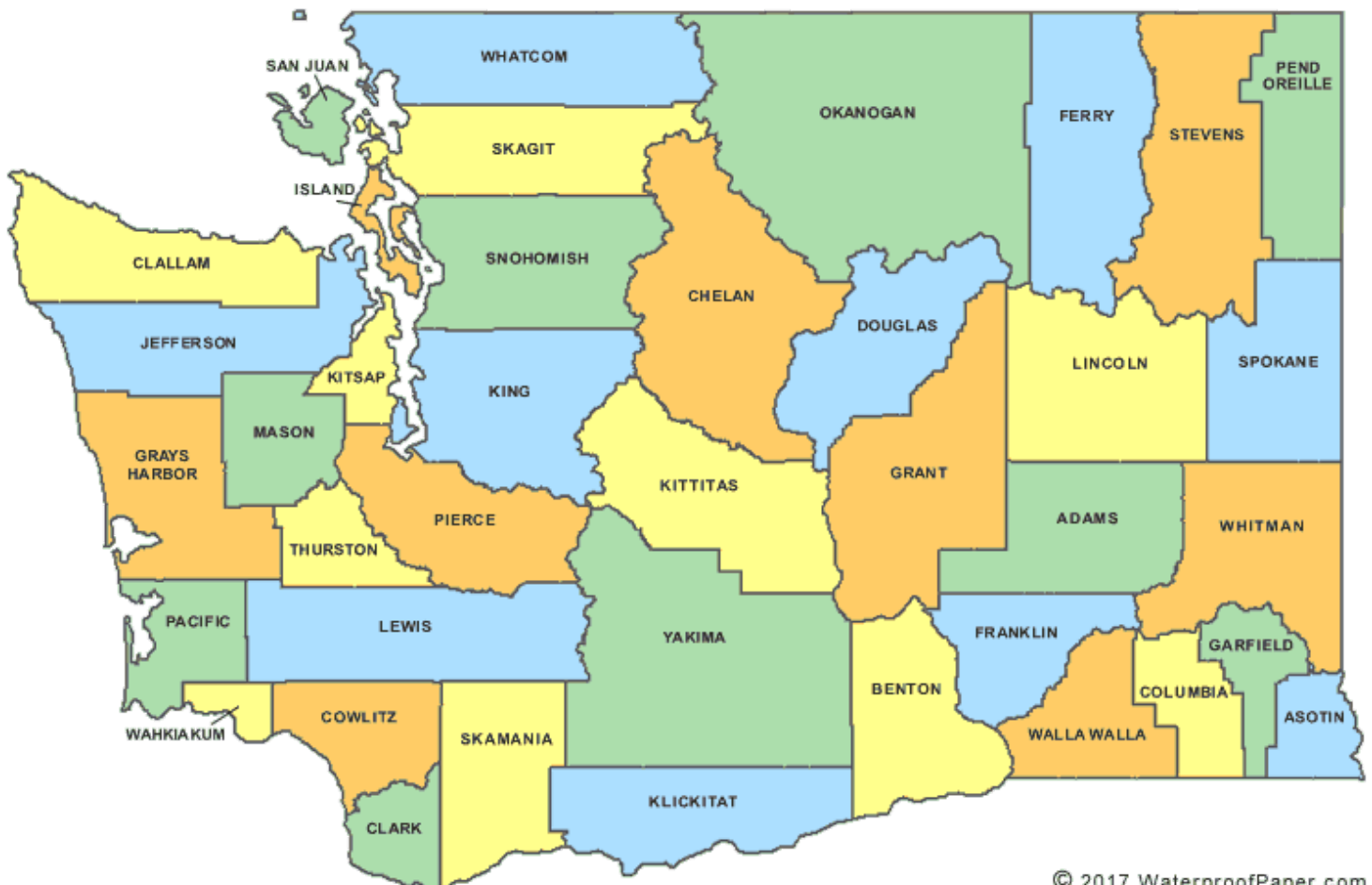


THEODORE R. BROWNE (CA. 1910-1979)

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A pioneer playwright, actor, author, and teacher, Theodore Browne was best known for his association with the Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre in Seattle, Washington in the 1930s. He was also an original member of the American Negro Theatre (ANT) and one of the founders of the Negro Playwrights Company, both in New York. Brown was born in Suffolk, Virginia, and educated in the public schools of New York City. Browne received advanced degrees at the City College of New York (1941) and at Northeastern University (1944) in Boston.

Theodore Browne gained theatrical experience with the Civic Repertory Theatre in Seattle during the early 1930s, a community group that later became the Seattle Negro Unit of the Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre in 1936. When the Federal Theatre began its operation in Seattle in 1936, Brown was named assistant director of the Negro Unit, where he also acted, directed, and was its resident playwright. Between 1936 and 1937, the unit produced four plays by Browne: an adaptation of *Lysistrata*, *Natural Man*, *A Black Woman Called Moses*, and *Swing, Gates, Swing*. *Lysistrata*, an African American adaptation of Aristophanes' comedy, was first produced at the Orpheum Theatre in Seattle in 1936. Browne changed the locale from Ancient Greece to Ethiopia and used the play to subtly critique war. The play described the women of Ethiopia who withheld sex from their returning soldier-husbands until they stopped waging war. The controversial production was deemed too risqué for Seattle audiences and halted after only one performance. Reportedly, the production was also shut down because the change in locale to an Ethiopian setting troubled the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration.

Browne also wrote two other productions for the Seattle unit, *A Black Woman Called Moses*, a two-act drama produced in 1937 that centers on Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad and *Swing, Gates, Swing* a musical revue. *Natural Man* (originally titled *This Ole Hammer*) was an eight-episode folk drama with music produced first in 1936 was also a Browne play. The play's storyline was loosely based on the legendary folk John Henry, who tests his prodigious physical skills against a steam engine, the symbol of the encroaching machine age. The play also made social commentary about racial injustice and oppression. John Henry epitomized the African American's indomitable spirit and will to survive against almost impossible odds.

When Browne left Seattle to join the American Negro Theatre in 1940, he persuaded the company to produce *Natural Man* in 1941 at the 135th St. Library Theatre in Harlem.

Stanley Greene played John Henry, with a noteworthy cast that included Alvin Childress, Ruby Wallace (later Ruby Dee), Kenneth Mannigault, Frederick O'Neal, and Alice Childress.

Browne, along with Langston Hughes and Theodore Ward, helped to found the Negro Playwrights company in New York City that produced Ward's *Big White Fog* in 1940. After World War II, Browne lived in Roxbury, Massachusetts, where he taught theatre, lectured, and maintained ties with the New England Repertory Theatre. He received the Rockefeller/Dramatists Guild Fellowship in Playwriting, the first African American to be honored with this award. Theodore Browne died in Boston at age 68.

Subjects:

African American History, People

Terms:

Musicians, 20th Century (1900-1999), Gender - Men, Educators, United States - New York, Performing Arts - Actors, United States - Massachusetts, Africa - Ethiopia, United States - Washington

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